

SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans

The Sign of the Covenant (Romans 4:9-15)

In Romans 4:9-17, Paul seeks to expand upon his overall theme of continuation. But now, the emphasis is focused on God's intention to offer His plan of salvation to Gentiles as well as Jews. He simply proves that point by using the circumcision of Abraham. Its purpose was to serve as a sign of the covenant previously established by God on Abraham's behalf, recorded for us in Genesis 15:12-21. Once again, the apostle's brilliant and irrefutable reasoning is on display. He begins by confronting the Jewish prejudicial and preconceived notion that the blessing of God's salvation alluded to by David in Psalm 32:1-2, was reserved exclusively for a circumcised Jew. Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6 again in v9, as a reminder of that foundational moment in God's redemptive purpose; and then with the necessary follow-up, writes this in Romans 4:10-11 –

“How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them.”

The promise of God for being justified by faith, given in conjunction with the unconditional covenant ratified by God alone (Genesis 15:1-21), was issued to Abraham while he was an uncircumcised Semite and not a circumcised Jew. So much for the exclusivity of the Jewish people in being the sole recipients of God's plan of salvation! Paul then establishes an important distinction in Romans 4:13-15, where we read the following –

“For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there is no violation.”

That distinction had been lost on the majority of Israelites throughout their history as a nation. They received two different covenants, one given to Abraham and the other ratified through Moses; in order to establish Israel as a theocratic nation under God. The Abrahamic Covenant consisted of an unconditional promise to be received by faith, designed to be redemptive in nature (Galatians 3:15-18). But the Mosaic Covenant was conditional, composed of laws for the purpose of governing the obedience of those living under it (Deuteronomy 28:1-2; 15). Together, they were meant to complement each other. But the great misunderstanding of the Jewish people caused them to view the governance covenant as redemptive, believing they could achieve a righteous standing with God through obedience (“the works of the law”). Paul's practical point in vv13-15, involves telling his Jewish readership that they have it backwards, and are guilty of a fatal flaw in their thinking, in pursuing a system of works-righteousness doomed to fail. It is this critical error on the part of his fellow Jewish people, which the apostle repeatedly points out, throughout his letter to the church in Rome.